

Wildlife

Sketchbook

BY NED SMITH

Birds are commonly thought of as dainty eaters of seeds and insects, but a surprising number subsist largely or entirely upon fish. Birds like the squat little puffin and the lanky heron, the majestic osprey and the comical grebe, enjoy catching and eating "finny" prey.

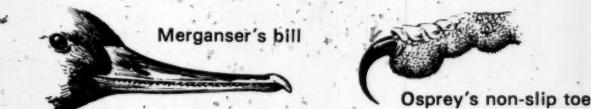
Their fishing methods vary widely, though most catch fish with their beaks. Probably the most spectacular is the high dive performed by the gannet. From a height of up to a hundred feet this great big bird partially folds its long wings and streaks downward, knifing into the sea to seize a fish beneath the surface. The tremendous impact is absorbed by a cushioning layer of air sacs spread across the bird's chest.



The brown pelican often plunges into the surf from full flight — a shock that, by all the rules, should break his neck — but doesn't.

The osprey is a hawk which lives almost entirely on fish of his own catching. Spotting a sucker or weakfish from high in the sky is no great feat for this sharp-eyed "fish hawk", but he commonly drops to a lower altitude and pauses as though to readjust his sights before finishing the plunge. Unlike the previously mentioned birds the osprey grasps his victims with his feet, which are covered with pointed scales and long, curved talons for a slip-proof grip.

One group of ducks, the mergansers, are full-time fish-eaters. They dive for their dinner, propelled by large webbed feet. Their bills are round in cross section, rather than broad and flat, and are armed with rows of tooth-like serrations that hold the slipperiest fish.



The herons, including egrets and bitterns, spear most of their prey by using two basic techniques — standing motionless until a fish wanders within striking range of their bills, or stalking slowly through the shallows.

The reddish egret often prances back and forth in shallow water, reeling drunkenly and jabbing in all directions at fleeing fish. When less energetically inclined, he stands motionless with wings outstretched to shade the water. Foolish fishes who accept the concealment and comfort of this welcome shade soon find themselves plucked from the water by their solemn "benefactor".

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